

**White Bear
Unitarian Universalist Church**

Eternity in an Hour

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WHITE BEAR UNITATRIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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READING

Sweet Darkness

David Whyte

When your eyes are tired
 the world is tired also.
 When your vision has gone,
 no part of the world can find you.
 It's time to go into the dark
 where the night has eyes
 to recognize its own.
 There you can be sure
 you are not beyond love.
 The dark will be your home
 tonight.
 The night will give you a horizon
 further than you can see.
 You must learn one thing.
 The world was made to be free in.
 Give up all the other worlds
 except the one to which you belong.
 Sometimes it takes darkness
 and the sweet
 confinement of your aloneness
 to learn
 anything or anyone
 that does not bring you alive
 is too small for you.

Eternity in an Hour

There's a lovely story told by John O'Donohue, a Catholic writer who died in 2008.

When I was a young priest [in Ireland], I had occasion to visit a contemplative community of sisters. An older sister opened the door. Knowing that I was a new priest, she asked for my first blessing. It struck me how ironical this situation was: here was a woman who had spent over sixty years of her life navigating the searing silence and darkness of God, yet she was asking a twenty-five year old for his blessing.

She knelt before him, calling him "Father."

When she stood up, I decided to kneel down and ask for her blessing. She seemed utterly taken aback; she mumbled something and practically ran out of the room. The system made her feel

that she could not bless, and conversely it made me think I could. But who has the power to bless? This question is not about institutional status. When you bless another, you first gather yourself, you reach below your surface mind and personality, down to the deep resource within you, namely, to your soul. Blessing is from soul to soul.

It's a horizontal not hierarchical, motion; reciprocal, not one-way.

I think that in 2019 one of reasons people still come to congregations, still belong to communities like this, why we come in person, once a week, by choice, we who are not contemplatives in convents, not priests or monks of any kind, just people trying to get by, trying to be good, trying to be whole – one of the reasons we come is to remember, to learn, to practice, how to bless each other and be blessed, how to tap the core of authenticity and integrity within, what O'Donohue calls “the soul,” how to touch that light within our own selves, find that light, and trust that light and shine that light, and by that light behold and honor the flickering, shining radiance of other people – and bow to it, metaphorically. Nod to it, kneel to it, notice. It seems so simple, but it's hard. We come here to remember how to notice one another, how to notice and bless the miracle of one another, how to bless the whole world that way. Annie Dillard wrote, *We are here to witness the creation and abet it. We are here to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. We are here especially to notice the beautiful faces and complex natures of each other. Otherwise, creation would be playing to an empty house.* It's hard, I think, in 2019, for Unitarian Universalists even to have language for this.

I was struck this week by the unscripted response Nancy Pelosi gave to a reporter who asked if she hates President Trump. She was leaving the press conference when he shouted out his question, but she turned to that reporter and spoke face to face in a quivering voice, “As a Catholic, I resent your using the word hate in a sentence that addresses me. I don't hate anyone. I was raised in a way that is a heart full of love and always pray for the president. I pray for the president all the time. So don't mess with me when it comes to words like that.” I think she was sincere, and I think that's about blessing, about the soul of a person seeking, like groundwater, underneath everything, the very soul of another person. It's not about liking somebody. It's about holding infinity and eternity and sanctity and mystery in your grubby hands, and understanding your place and the place of all creatures, every creature, in that cosmic sphere. To walk around like that is more than a spiritual practice, that's a spiritual identity to put on and inhabit.

I'm not talking here about people we might potentially hate; I'm talking about people we don't hate at all, just ones we brush by. I'm talking about noticing the same way you sometimes catch yourself noticing a tree or a bird or a flower or any other inexplicable miracle. Holding humans, without exception, just like that. You can still hate their politics, and argue with them, fight against them, resist them, impeach them, but you can't, we can't, hate, objectify, dehumanize, cancel. I told you it is sometimes hard, this work of blessing.

There's another story I love, by the novelist Marilynne Robinson. The main character in her book, *Gilead*, is a minister, the son and grandson of Congregationalist ministers in Iowa. In his old age, near the end of his life, he remembers a long ago afternoon when, as children, he and his friends baptized a litter of kittens. “We were pious children in a pious town in a pious time,” he

says. They had a doll's dress in which they swaddled each one in turn for as long as they would stand it, which was about momentarily. *"I moistened their brows,"* he says, *"and repeated the full Trinitarian formula... I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time. I don't wish to be urging the ministry on you [the old man is remembering all this, and telling it in a letter to his own son], but there are some advantages to it you might not know to take account of if I did not point them out. Not that you have to be a minister to confer a blessing.*

Not at all. It's part of why we're all here at all, to practice an alertness to the sacredness in others and to our own sacredness, in a moment in our history, our society's history, when what's sacred is so often belittled, betrayed, brushed aside, desecrated, in the rush of busyness and business. Our blessings are not priestly, not pious or pompous or prescribed. They're not elegantly crafted. We can't find the right words; we make our blessings clumsily, and they are the outward and visible signs of our absolute and inherent imperfection, and sometimes, for this reason (because they come sputtering forth out of our humility and our humanity and not out of our pride, precisely because we don't know exactly what to say, nor how) these can be the most holy sacraments we make, these clumsy efforts to speak the truth in love to each other. Sometimes our blessing is silent, just making space, or making time, when we maybe thought we had no time, for someone to tell us their story.

A blessing, says John O'Donohue, is a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, and heal and strengthen. To be in the world at all is to be distant from the homeland of wholeness. When we bless, we somehow go beyond our present frontiers and reach into the source of ourselves, the core self that dovetails with the infinite. Our grounding in the soul means that however badly we think of ourselves, there is a wholesomeness in us that no one has ever been able to damage. The intention of friendship, love and prayer is to allow your heart to enter this inner sanctuary where it can regain its confidence and renew its energy. This is what it means to give a blessing or receive one. When you bless someone, you call forth the force of their infinite self, and your own.

I think of William Blake:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour...*

To bless a person is to see so deeply into them that you understand they contain multitudes, an infinite mind, dreams and memories and history thousands of years in the making, coming to bear precisely now. Blessing is what happens soul-to-soul: the infinite in you actually touching

the eternal in others; the light within – the most vulnerable and also the most invincible part of us, the most invisible, and most radiant, part of us joining, even for an instant, the light of someone else.

Blessing is what happens in all the elaborate rites and rituals of all the world's religions, but more often and maybe even more potently, it what happens at the four-way stop sign at rush hour when you make eye contact for a split second with another driver, and in a flash, you hope they make it home. There's infinity right there, as if the movie has paused and you're both in slowest of slow motion, and then it starts again, horns honk, traffic moves, you forget it even happened, until maybe in the night, in your bed, you wonder who that was. It happens when you see another person here, in hallway, in the coatroom, in this space across the room, and you notice the sadness in their eyes, almost like a color; you see the weight of something mighty on their shoulders literally pressing down, and whether you know them or not, whether they see you or not, you remember for a fraction of an instant what it means to walk with sorrow, to carry everywhere you go the weight of grief. You linger for a moment on their face before glancing away in embarrassment; maybe they see you, maybe they don't; and somewhere inside you, something whispers, without words because there isn't even time for words to form, a prayer for solace, a prayer for the easing of all burdens, a song of lamentation and compassion. Your spirit sends a benediction. And that's an eternity there, that noticing, even if it only lasts a moment. You pay attention, and that's valuable, the way paying money is valuable. It costs you something to notice.

When we say the space is made holy by your presence, we don't mean merely physically showing up and sitting down. We mean being fully present. This is a space where the soul can show up and be seen, where we practice the intention of attention. Martin Buber, 20th century Jewish philosopher and theologian, said in his most famous book, *I and Thou*, *All our lives, moment by moment, day by day, we search the eyes of others for that flicker of "yes," which confirms the essence of our being. It is from one person to another that the bread of self-being is passed. We can become whole only in virtue of a relation to another. We find our real existence only in conjunction with others.*

David Whyte's poem in the reading reminds us how poignant and how lonely this can be, how self-blessing sometimes is required, too, how in prayer or mediation, or maybe at this time of year, just sitting in the dark, we can find ourselves again, bless ourselves again, remember who we are.

*When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.
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no part of the world can find you.
It's time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognize its own.
There you can be sure
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 The world was made to be free in.
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 Sometimes it takes darkness
 and the sweet
 confinement of your aloneness
 to learn
 anything or anyone
 that does not bring you alive
 is too small for you.*

Until we do this, until we find self-blessing, we can't possibly bless anybody else. Then they look upon us, and we are strengthened, and round it goes, like a bright circuit.

We are trying here to be stronger, braver bless-ers of each other. Last month we brought an organizer from OutFront Minnesota to teach us a little bit, to coax us and provoke us a little bit, into thinking and feeling and wondering more purposefully about what it would mean, what it would look like, what it would have to look like, for this congregation to be a full community of cis-gender and transgender and non-binary people whole-heartedly- not just in theory, not just in words, but with brave and breaking, whole, full-bodied, hearts. 90 people showed up on a Wednesday night, and some of them said afterwards, "Oh, that training was so basic and simplistic – there was nothing new there; I didn't learn a thing," and some of them said afterwards, "Oh, that training was so challenging and complex on so many levels – there was so much that was so new, I couldn't learn a thing," and so here we all are, unlikely fellow-travelers, all on this journey together. After the holidays, we'll convene a more deliberate working group on trans inclusion, working on education, advocacy, theology, hopefully on architecture too, as we think about the bathrooms here (and if any of this interests you, come and let me know) –but for now we're traveling along, trying to be braver, better, bolder in the ways we hold and behold one another, the ways we bless each other.

We are learning about pronouns, and why it matters that we name each other in the ways we're asking to be named, why it matters that we start again from the beginning, and meet each other first as human merely beings: sacred, magical, mystical creatures, with no assumptions or presumptions about gender (or sexuality, or other identities), no matter what we think we see or want to hear or believe we know. We're learning about pronouns, which to some perhaps feels new and strange, but really we're learning about self-determination, which should not be new to Unitarian Universalists at all. We're learning how to offer the courtesy, the decency, of our full attention. We're making mistakes now, stumbling and stumbling and mumbling apologies, and really I think this is okay, because there's no right way or wrong way to do this- except that when someone tells you what their pronouns are, that they go by she/her, or he/him, or

they/them, or simply their name with no pronouns at all, or words you've never even heard before, you have to honor that. You have to try, we have to try, and when we forget, we have to ask again, and be ready to be corrected, and not be flustered or upset or defensive or ashamed. To be corrected, gently, is a kind of blessing. To be mis-gendered again and again and again likely feels to a trans person or a non-binary person the way it would feel to anyone else. Think about that – if people constantly got your gender wrong. It could feel like they didn't think you were worth it. At some point, some part of you would die inside – and the difference here is that ***people actually are dying***, by violence, by hatred and by despair, by the exhaustion of despair. We are, on this earth and in this church, unlikely fellow travelers, journeying together, blessing one another as we lurch along; and our clumsiest efforts will always be the outward and visible signs of our absolute and inherent imperfection, as well as signs of grace, and because of this, a kind of holy sacrament.

People say, *I get it, but I just can't get past the grammatical dilemma, using "they" and "them" for a single individual*. That's just not how I was taught.

And I say,

Friend, no one loves grammar more than I do. I was raised by a man who taught English to public school 8th graders his entire life, a man who corrected a misplaced apostrophe on a hand-made Father's Day card with a red pencil when I was in first grade. The bible in our house was *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White. I was a language major, parsing sentences in several languages, conjugating verbs and memorizing the declensions of nouns, pronouns and adjectives for years and years and bleary-eyed years, for fun. I wrapped the pages in Saran Wrap, then a Ziploc bag, and hung them in the shower, so I could always practice: *amo, amas, amat...* I love order and accuracy, and I love getting it right the way a mathematician loves getting it right - except that language is not math. It's fluid, it's on fire, it's alive, and it evolves– so much so that in six or seven hundred years (not long), no one will understand the English that we're speaking now without a linguist, an anthropologist and a Rosetta Stone to decipher our quaint and ancient syntax.

Nor can any assumptions, instilled early on in us from everywhere, about the mythical binary world, the perfectly dualistic and perfectly imaginary universe of black/white, up/down, female/male, become an excuse or a stumbling block to learning better science and widening the cramped imagination. Just because you were told the world is flat and everyone agreed, and church and state agreed, doesn't mean it is.

How did we learn what we think we know, and how can we help each other, bless each other, in unlearning? What if we'd been told in Sunday school, what if the story actually said, that when God spoke to Adam in the garden on the seventh day of creation, he gave him this commission:

Sit quietly, Adam.

Don't rush to speak and dominate.

Settle yourself, and wait until the other human, this one, tells you who they are.

Make no assumptions, unlearn the making of assumptions, which already, here on your first day of life, you seem to have mastered. Unlearn the making of assumptions, the imposition of your singular and limited perspective. This garden is so small. You have no idea! The world is

unimaginably large. Your assumptions will only lead to trouble, centuries of trouble, for everybody, for every living thing upon the earth.

There are two of you here.

Listen, both of you, and let all these animals speak to you their chosen names.

Open your ears and your eyes and your heart and your soul to these others, who were already here before you arrived.

Listen.

Wait.

See if you can learn who you are in response to their stories.

Loosen your hold on control.

Loosen your fear.

Bless this new world with your attention, by noticing what and who all else abounds in it. Notice who weeps and laughs and loves beside you, and let your own tears water them with blessing in return.

Who do you think you are? A speck of temporary dust, on a speck of a rock in infinite space, and to dust you shall return.

Enter every encounter, therefore, with every creature that you meet, as an eternity of wonder, and be generous, and gentle, and curious, and wild with courage, brazen with love, for the little while you're here.

As far as we know, God did not say this to Adam in the garden, but as our friends in the United Church of Christ remind us, *God is still speaking* (that's their denomination's tagline). *God is still speaking*, or if you prefer, everything is still evolving, which is the best good news, the gladdest gospel, that there ever was: everything is fluid, humanity is still evolving, like humanity's beautiful languages, and we are here to grow in love and learn the right vernacular, sacred, simple speech, for blessing the world and each other.

silence

I want to invite you again to the "communion of names" we practiced last month. Turn to the person next to you. Tell them your names and the pronouns you go by. They will say to you, *Hello, _____*. *Your presence here is a blessing*. And then you'll switch, and then you'll turn to the person on your other side, till this whole room is blessed.

Closing Blessing
anonymous, from Ireland

May the blessing of light be on you,
light without and light within, and light inside the darkness within.
May the blessed sunlight shine upon you and warm your heart till it glows, like a great peat fire,
so that strangers may come and warm themselves, and so that friends may come.

And may the light shine out of the eyes of you,
like a candle set in the windows of a house, bidding the wanderer to come in out of the storm.

And may the blessing of the rain be on you— the soft, sweet rain.
May it fall upon your spirit so that the seedlings of light in your shadow
may spring up, and shed their sweetness on the air.

And may the blessing of the great rains be on you,
that they beat upon your spirit and wash it fair and clean,
and leave there many a shining pool, and sometimes a star.

And may the blessing of the earth be on you—
the great round earth who carries all;
the great round earth whose suffering is no different from our own,
the fragile and radiant earth.

May you ever have a kindly greeting for people you pass as you are going along the roads.

And now may the holy bless you, and bless you kindly,
your kin and all creatures, bless you and keep you, now and forever.

Amen.